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Opinion

Lazy accusations of genocide distort the reality of war

As confirmed by seven U.S. federal prosecutors of Nazi crimes, there is no Israeli government plan for mass killing.

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Palestinians return to their homes in the northern Gaza Strip via the coastal al-Rashid Road as part of the ceasefire agreement with Israel, Jan. 27, 2025. Photo by Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90.

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Israel is perpetrating "racial genocide ... [in a] desperate attempt to break the will of the Palestinian people." While this charge seems ripped from today's headlines, it was made in 1976 by the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations.

The claim that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, along with the inevitable comparison between the Nazis of World War II Germany and today's Jews, have long been a staple of anti-Zionist propaganda. So well-worn is the trope of Israeli genocide that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism includes it as an example of contemporary Jew-hatred. Since the Hamas-led terrorist attacks in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, bad actors have intentionally misrepresented the realities and laws of war to legitimize this calumny against Israel.

"War is hell," U.S. Gen. William Sherman famously said of the Civil War, and the conflict in Gaza epitomizes a distinct kind of hell. Taking place in a densely populated urban setting, it involves fighting against a terrorist group intricately linked to civilian structures such as hospitals, schools and mosques. The Palestinian people in Gaza find themselves trapped in this war zone, largely due to Egypt's ongoing and unlawful refusal to permit their evacuation. The situation has been devastating, leading to tens of thousands of fatalities and uprooting the majority of its residents, while many buildings have been damaged or destroyed.

None of these facts make it a genocide.

Genocide has long been known under international law as the "crime of crimes." It is defined in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. It is composed of five genocidal acts, including mass killings, accompanied by a "special intent" to destroy a group in whole or in part.

International tribunals have only recognized four atrocities as genocide: The Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, the massacre at Srebrenica, and the Cambodian genocide of Vietnamese and Cham Muslims. German domestic courts have recently recognized ISIS's campaign against the Yazidis as genocide. All of these included coordinated, deliberate and widespread efforts to destroy these groups with gas chambers, mobile killing units, execution sites and enslavement. The mass killings in these cases were accompanied by other systematic atrocities such as torture, sexual violence and other forms of cruelty. As confirmed by seven U.S. federal prosecutors of Nazi crimes, there is no Israeli government plan for mass killing.

that these numbers are correct (there are serious reasons to doubt that), they do not distinguish between Hamas fighters and non-combatants.

One cannot extrapolate genocide from the number of civilians killed. According to the Laws of War, civilian harm must be incidental and proportional to the anticipated military advantage. Proportionality is assessed based on the limited information available to the military commander during the attack. As the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia found in its report on NATO's bombing campaign of Serbia, proportionality lacks clear standards. Without understanding what information was available to the commander at the time of the attack, it is impossible to determine whether an attack was legal. Israeli operations receive approval from military lawyers, who have expert training in the laws of war.

After 20 months of conflict, most of Gaza is in ruins. Tragically, catastrophic destruction is the norm in urban warfare. The United States played a key role in the 2016 operation against Mosul, a stronghold of ISIS. Described as the heaviest urban combat since World War II, the battle left more than 80% of Mosul uninhabitable. Similarly, Raqqa in Syria, another ISIS-held city, was rendered "unfit for human habitation," with approximately 70% of the city damaged or destroyed. The U.S. military's intense bombardment, including firing more rounds in Raqqa over five months than any Marine artillery battalion since the Vietnam War, contributed to near-total destruction.

Under the Geneva Convention, hospitals enjoy special protection. However, when they are used for military purposes, they become legitimate targets. The United States has confirmed that Hamas operates out of al-Shifa hospital. In an operation at Kamal Adwan hospital, Israel captured hundreds of terrorists who took part in the Oct. 7 massacre. Freed Israeli hostages have recounted being held in and beneath hospitals in Gaza. This highlights the challenges of fighting an enemy that exploits civilian sites.

Lazy accusations of genocide are integral to the diplomatic war against the Jewish state. Not only are they false, but they also endanger Jewish communities worldwide, as demonstrated by the recent attacks in Washington, D.C., and Boulder, Colo.

These charges distort the Laws of War while cheapening the term genocide. By appropriating the term "genocide," detractors trivialize the suffering of actual genocide victims and weaponize a serious legal concept to delegitimize Israel and put Jews worldwide at risk.